Critical Trajectories:

Culture, Society, Intellectuals

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Chapter Seven Civic Seeing: Museums and the Organization of Vision

From the early modern period, museums have been places in which citizens – however they might have been defined – have met, conversed, been instructed, or otherwise engaged in rituals through which their rights and duties as citizens have been enacted. They have also been, from roughly the same period, primarily institutions of the visible in which objects of various kinds have been exhibited to be looked at. The issues I want to explore in this chapter are located at the intersections of these two aspects of the museum's history. They concern the respects in which the functioning of museums as civic institutions has operated through specific regimes of vision which, informing both the manner in which things are arranged to be seen and the broader visual environment conditioning practices of looking, give rise to particular forms of "civic seeing" in which the civic lessons embodied in those arrangements are to be seen, understood, and performed by the museum's visitors. Or at least by those visitors who are included in the museum's civic address. The rider is an important one. For while, since the French revolution, public museums have been theoretically committed to the service of universal citizenries, the practice has usually proved to be somewhat different with, at various points in time, women, children, the working classes, the colonized, and, in many western countries still (Dias, 2003), immigrants simply not being addressed by museums in ways that have enabled them to occupy the optical and epistemological vantage points which particular programs of "civic seeing" both require and make possible. Indeed, as we shall see, it is often through the forms of "civic seeing" that they effect that different kinds of museums have organized the distinction between citizens and non-citizens as precisely one of differentiated visual capacities.

As it will prove difficult to address these issues comprehensively in a chapter of this scope, I shall, instead, opt for a number of symptomatic examples which, ranging across different types of museum, will offer an insight into the civic assumptions informing some of the more distinctive "visual grammars" that

have been developed in association with museum displays from the early modern period to the present. I look first at the regimes of vision associated with public art museums, and especially at how these have operated as a means for enacting social distinctions in ways that have run counter to art museums' claims to speak to and for all citizens. I then look at some of the contrasting ways, from cabinets of curiosity through to evolutionary museums, in which a civic importance has been attached to seeing nature and the relations between different cultures in a proper light. In doing so, I also consider how questions of "civic seeing" relate to those concerning other forms of sensory involvement in museum displays and, indeed, to the more general forms of civic comportment associated with the museum's conception as a key site for "civic rituals" (Duncan, 1995).

This prepares the ground for an examination of the respects in which "civic seeing" in the museum is always posed relationally as a project requiring that seeing be regulated in ways that are designed to offset the influence of other practices of seeing, usually those associated with commercial forms of popular visual entertainment, which are said to lure the eye into civically unproductive forms of visual pleasure. I shall then come, finally, to consider some of the key ways in which questions of "civic seeing" are posed in relation to contemporary museum practices. These include debates about the extent to which the tension between museums and commercial forms of visual entertainment have now collapsed to such a degree that the ability of museums to shape distinctive forms of "civic seeing" is called into question. They also include attempts to move away from the directed forms of vision that have dominated western museum practices since the Enlightenment in favor of more dialogic practices of seeing which, in enabling a greater degree of visual give-and-take between different perspectives, might prove more conducive to the requirements of "civic seeing" in culturally diverse societies.

Divided Seeing: Visual Competence and the Art Museum

In a series of pamphlets he published in the final years and immediate aftermath of World War I, John Cotton Dana, the founding director of the Newark Museum, outlined his vision for a new museum, one which, escaping the influence of the old museums of Europe – and those American museums modeled on European examples – would become useful civic instruments for a young, democratic, and industrious nation. An important part of the set of rhetorical contrasts between old and new museums that he organized for this purpose consisted in the different ways in which they addressed the eye. New museums, he argued:

> are not to be storage warehouses, or community attics, or temples of dead gods, or copies of palaces of an extinct nobility, or costly reproductions of ancient temples, or grand and elaborate structures which are of service only as evidences of conspicuous waste by the rich and as ocular demonstrations of the unwise expenditure of public funds. (Dana, 1917b: 18)

Instead, he argued, they should aspire to be Institutes of Visual Instruction if they were to engage the eye in a lively and useful civic fashion that would dispel what he had earlier called "the gloom of the museum" (Dana, 1917b). Returning to the same theme three years later, the ethos of visual instruction to which the new museum should aspire was highlighted by his condemnation of America's existing art museums as mere "gazing museums" (Dana, 1920: 13).

In the event, Dana's voice was not to prove the most influential in determining the future path along which American art museums would develop. While the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the context of the New Deal, did witness a significant stress on the public educational and civic role that museums should play in relation to the general population (see Adams, 1939), and while Dana remained an active and influential contributor to these debates until his death in 1929, the practices of art museums over these years were, in Andrew McClellan's assessment, more in tune with the curatorial philosophy of Benjamin Ives Gilman at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts (McClellan, 2003). As heir to the civic value that Victorian theorists of art had invested in aesthetic education as a means of ordering persons and adjusting them to their place in an ordered society, Gilman continued to stress the special responsibility of the art museum to cultivate an appreciation of beauty by exhibiting the classical and modern canons of painting and sculpture. For Dana, by contrast, it was precisely this prejudice that had to be broken in favor of an active engagement with the standards of beauty enjoying widespread use and circulation in the objects of everyday life if the museum were to become a "living, active and effective institution" (Dana, 1917b: 23).

As Theodore Low (1942) was to note with regret, however, the tide was running against Dana, and against Gilman too, in favor of a conception in which, far from being a place for generalized forms of "civic seeing," in which the lessons to be derived from art's improving qualities were to be made equally available to all visitors, the art museum was to function as a space governed by what Pierre Bourdieu (1996b) called "the pure gaze" of the connoisseur. This had been evident earlier in the century in the so-called "battle of the casts." This pitched the inimitable quality of the original prized by the connoisseur against the educational value that had been placed on casts in earlier Victorian conceptions of the art museum's function. The battle was resolved largely in favor of the former tendency at both the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art (Wallach, 1998: 49–56). This tendency was, moreover, significantly strengthened and generalized through the US art museum sector as a result of the influence of the course in museum studies that Paul Sachs ran at Harvard from the 1920s through to the 1950s. Focused on cultivating "the most exacting standards of an elite," this course promoted the interests of a "narrow cult of collectors, critics and fellow museum professionals" (McClellan, 2003: 22) at the expense of the public in ways which, as Dana had warned, resulted in a complete absence of any engaged civic purpose or usefulness.

The tension that is traced here between the art museum as "an elite temple of the arts" and as "a utilitarian instrument for democratic education" (Hooper-Greenhill,

1989: 63) has, however, a longer history, one in which the forms of "seeing" that the museum is to organize, and for whom, have constantly been points at issue. While the French revolution had opened the Louvre to the public, and celebrated its capacity as a venue for new forms of "civic seeing" in which the virtues of a republican citizenry would be strengthened, the actual practices of the museum assumed a public that was much the same as that which had informed pre-revolutionary plans for both the Louvre and the Luxembourg Gallery. There was no attempt to instruct the museum's new public on how to read and interpret the art displayed any more than the Louvre was opened to popular arts rooted in the everyday lives of the people. "Theoretically one," as McClellan puts it, "the museum public was divided by degrees of visual competence" (McClellan, 1994: 9). The connections between these divisions of visual capacity and contemporary social divisions were evident in a continuing tradition of caricature which, satirizing those who visited art museums without the requisite forms of visual competence, confirmed a sense of superiority on the part of those whose eyes had been trained in the correct ways of seeing. Honoré Daumier's engraving, discussed by McClellan, of a rustic family unable to appreciate the non-realistic nature of

Figure 7.1 The work of art: rural literalism satirized as a new form of cultural illiteracy ("Effet de la sale des *Pietà* sur les spectateurs ruraux," *Journal amusant*, 23 July 1859)

Egyptian funerary decoration thus finds its echo, more than a half-century later, in a caricature of rural visitors who, as Dominique Poulot (1994) notes, proved unable to respond appropriately to the new forms of attention required when religious art was placed in the secular and civic context of the art museum (Fig. 7.1)

If it organized a division in class terms, the civic address of the Louvre was also uneven in terms of gender. For, whilst open to women, the Louvre only included them within its civic address indirectly and in purely auxiliary roles to the extent that, in accordance with the exclusively male conception of revolutionary citizenship, its primary concern was to inculcate the virtues of a republican brotherhood through its construction of a male pantheon of civic virtue. The same was true, nearly a century later, of Ruskin's program for the museum in which both women of all classes and working-class men were addressed through an assumed norm of the middle-class man's relation to art. The resulting relay system of looks was one in which bodily passions and manual capacities were to be directed by subordinating them to the controlling influence of male and class-centered ways of seeing (Helsinger, 1994).

Seeing and Enacting Nature's Civic Lessons

Although most conspicuously foregrounded in the practices of art museums and the debates to which these have given rise, questions concerning how best to arrange the visual environment so as to promote specific civic values have also been centrally implicated in the development of other types of museum. And, as in the case of the art museum, such debates have concerned more than the regulation of sight. As key sites for the performance of civic rituals, the organization of seeing that museums aim to effect has to be seen in relation to the more general ordering of the forms of self-presentation, social interrelation, and civic comportment that they construct as normative ideals for their visitors. Indeed, it is only in the context of this broader set of concerns that the specific civic value that is placed on seeing as such can be properly appreciated. For the privileging of sight in relation to the other senses that this represents is a relatively recent phenomenon and, since there are ample signs that the attention that is accorded to speaking, hearing, and touching in contemporary museum practices are now challenging the primacy of the visual, one whose historical rim may well now be in view. It is, indeed, precisely because this is so that there has been a marked revival of interest in those pre- or early-modern practices of collection and exhibition in which civic issues were posed in relation to a broader mix of the senses, rather than solely to vision in isolation.

Paula Findlen's work has been important in this regard, tracing the respects in which the development of museums as civil and, later, civic spaces depended on a series of transformations in their socio-sensory environments. Modeled initially, in early humanist conceptions, on the monastic *studium*, the museum was seen as a solitary and contemplative space sequestered from the noise of the world. "*Museum* is a place where the Scholar sits alone," John Amos Comenius wrote in 1659, "apart

from other men, addicted to his Studies, while reading books" (cited in Findlen, 1994: 102). The movement of the museum from the inner recesses of the house into more permeable spaces that accompanied the development of the Renaissance cabinet was also a movement from silence into sound as the museum's function as a *solitarium* gave way to its new conception as what Findlen calls a "conversable space."

Providing a context in which displaying nature served as a prelude to ritualized conversational exchanges between (mainly) elite males, this space played a key role in shaping both the codes of civility and the classed and gendered boundaries of civil society through the inclusions and exclusions that it operated. The parallel transition, in royal collections, from the private and enclosed *studio* of the prince to the *galleria* also involved the construction of more permeable spaces in which the codes of civility that were cultivated through knowledgeable conversation about the collections were invested with a more public and civic significance. The Düsseldorf Gallery, while adjacent to the Elector's palace and accessible through it, thus also had separate outside entrances to which local artists, civil servants, and nobility had unrestricted access and through which, as Goethe recorded in the account of his visit to the Gallery in 1768, members of a more general public were also able to enter (Sheehan, 2000: 33).

As places for looking and seeing, certainly, but also as places for ritualized conversations, such early modern museums did not isolate and privilege seeing at the expense of other forms of sensory involvement. The practice of seeing itself, moreover, was modeled on the norms of conversational give-and-take rather than itself constituting a norm of attentiveness to which, as would later be the case, the other senses would be obliged to defer. The "polymathic cabinets of curiosity" of the seventeenth century, Barbara Stafford (1994) thus argues, served as prompts for conversation as a means of resolving the perplexities occasioned by the puzzling juxtaposition of apparently disconnected objects. Equally, far from distancing the eye before a scene of ordered vision, they enticed the spectator to enter into the system of sideways looks characterizing the cabinet's regime of visuality. "Crumbling shells, clumps of madrepores, coral branches, miniature busts, Chinese porcelain teapots, small medals, intaglio gems, pottery shards, drawn and engraved portraits, masks, carved ivory, pickled monsters, religious utensils, and multicultural remains," she writes, "cacophonously 'chatted' among themselves and with the spectator" (Stafford, 1994: 238).

The reciprocity between seeing and conversation that is evident here was intelligible where museum collections provided the props and occasions for ritual exchanges between members of a restricted civil society whose members were presumed to meet as equals. Its intelligibility, furthermore, depended on the assumption that such conversations could be conducted on the basis of the observable properties of things that were equally open to the inspection of all. These assumptions no longer held when, under the influence of Enlightenment conceptions, the museum was developed as an instrument of public instruction. Developed most influentially at the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, the program for the Enlightment museum installed a hierarchical relationship between curators and

visitors in the form of a practice of directed vision through which the latter, by following the guidance of the former, were to be made to see the rational order underlying nature's apparent diversity.

This hierarchical relationship was both social and epistemological. The curator and visitor were placed on opposite sides of a line separating those who had been trained to see the invisible order subtending nature's rational classification and those untrained beholders who needed to be tutored into the right ways of seeing if they were to absorb the civic import of nature's lessons correctly. This involved, Lee Rust Emerson argues, "a special discipline of seeing" (Brown, 1997: 143) in which the exhibition of different species and *genera* in accordance with the differences in their observable characteristics was a technical device intended to lead the eye to an apprehension of the invisible logic of classification which, laying at the back of such visible differences in appearances, bore witness to a rational order underlying both nature and, as the manifestation of that order, the human mind that was also capable of understanding it. Georges Cuvier's armoires, as Brown puts it, "charted a natural world whose apparent surfaces were only an index to what could be 'seen'" (1997: 78). The economy of the relations between words and things was entirely altered in this context. Just as the eye of the visitor was distanced from the exhibited objects in order to look through them to perceive the order underlying them, so words here functioned purely descriptively as a scientific nomenclature that was superimposed on the order of things via labels which located the exhibits to which they were attached in their proper place within the rationally partitioned space of *genera* and species.

In thus making the underlying order of nature democratically visible – or, at least, making it so in principle, provided only that the citizen would subordinate his vision to the direction of the curator – the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle affirmed the principles of revolutionary citizenship by serving as a place "where citizens could behold for themselves the mutual identity of nature and reason" (Brown, 1997: 131). That, at any rate, was the theory. In practice, as well as in Cuvier's own later interpretation, the Muséum, by providing an insight into the invisible order underlying natural and, by implication, social life as well, served, in the aftermath of the political upheavals of the revolution, as an antidote to excessive political passion. "Civic seeing" here was an object lesson in order. The same was true of the civic lessons that the evolutionary museums, which flourished in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century, were meant to impart, but with the significant qualification that the order that had now to be seen and learnt was an evolutionary one governed by the principles of unidirectional and progressive time. This was, then, a developmental order which enjoined the "evolutionary showmen," who aimed to translate the principles of Darwinism into museum displays, to do so in ways that would make the lessons of evolution, and the political conclusions to be drawn from those lessons, readily perceptible.

This involved, as I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Bennett, 2004b), striking a delicate balance between two conflicting tendencies. On the one hand,

the exhibition of progress needed to be arranged so as to locate viewers within developmental time in ways that would promote, as a civic task, an awareness of the need to contribute to the continuing progress of civilization, and thus ward off the threat of social stagnation or, worse, degeneration. The depiction of particular customs, technologies, and ways of doing things as outmoded in evolutionary terms thus served as a spur to the adoption of new forms of behavior that would further the evolutionary development of civilization, freeing it from the drag effect of unthinking habit.

On the other hand, however, in a political context in which socialist agitation was proving increasingly influential, and in which the naturally ordained orders of gender were being seriously questioned by the programs of first-wave feminism, such displays were also called on to stress the principles of evolutionary gradualism. By giving a new meaning to the old maxim that "nature makes no jumps," Darwin's account of evolution as the incremental outcome of countless unintended minor variations provided a template for late Victorian liberalism in its concern to manage progress by both encouraging and stimulating it, while simultaneously restraining it within the pre-established limits of a capitalist and patriarchal – and, of course, colonial – social order.

This resulted in a number of significant departures from the forms of "eye management" associated with the Enlightenment museum. For, since the order of things constructed by evolutionary displays was a developmental one, that order could not be revealed, as in the Enlightenment museum, by organizing the visitor's gaze to look through the objects displayed in order to provide a glimpse of the broader order of classes and *genera* into which they fitted. Yet the order of things that evolutionary arrangements aimed to render perceptible was, like its Enlightenment predecessor, still an invisible one. As the outcome of countless unintended variations, evolution, whether of species, of design traits, or of culture and civilization, was not itself directly perceptible. It could only be made visible by displaying – side by side – forms of life, or artifacts, that both resembled each other and yet were also different, and to do so in a manner that suggested that those differences had resulted from the passage of time. Evolution, that is to say, could only be seen in the relations between things and not in things themselves. This entailed that, far from looking *into* things, the visitor's eye had to be directed to look *along* the relations between them. And, even then, a correct appreciation of the direction and tempo of evolution could not be guaranteed. How to ensure that visitors followed things in the right order? How many objects to include in a sequence, given that too few intervals between the start and the end of evolutionary series would dramatize evolution, whereas too many, while getting across the message of evolutionary gradualness, would tend to clutter displays and make them illegible? These were the kinds of debates that preoccupied the directors and curators of evolutionary museums in their endeavors to make the new order of nature that the evolutionary sciences had constructed civically readable.

While clearly different from both the "pure gaze" of connoisseurship and the practice of seeing associated with the Enlightenment museum, the practice of

looking along developmental series promoted by evolutionary museums was equally a form of directed seeing. As such, it gave rise to its own distinctive way of distinguishing those who could, and those who could not, properly perceive and understand its message. The structure of the "pure gaze," as we have seen, separates those who have been tutored to see art aesthetically, in and for itself, from those who have not. The penetrative look into natural history displays in order to perceive the rational order that lies behind the visible differences that mark nature's surface appearances also inscribed a division in the visiting public between those trained in the techniques of penetrative seeing and those weekend and holiday visitors who, seeing little distinction between the Muséum and the menagerie, which was also located in the Jardin des Plantes, related to both as assemblages of the curious, the marvelous, and the exotic (Burkhardt, 1997; Spray, 1997).

The differentiation of visual capacities associated with evolutionary museums was different in kind to the degree that it arose immanently from the logic underlying evolutionary displays rather than from the uneven distribution of particular visual trainings. For the meaning of evolutionary displays could only be taken in by the eye which, in sweeping along the relations between objects in evolutionary series, could also fathom their direction. This was possible only from the vantage point of the most highly developed stages of evolution. Just as, in the evolution of species, only the evolved human eye could see and understand the processes that had made its own development possible, so also only the eye that was socially and culturally evolved could properly "take in" the meaning of evolutionary displays of cultural artifacts, peoples, and ways of life. This vantage point was most evidently socially marked in its racialization: since their undeveloped state, both culturally and physiologically, was taken as axiomatic, non-white peoples and their cultures were gathered in museums only to be looked at, not to look. It was, however, also a classed vantage point, requiring that the visual practices of the working classes be subjected to a developmental program if they, too, were to see evolution correctly. In this case, as with the other examples we have considered, museum programs for "civic seeing" also involved a struggle to detach sight from the influence of popular forms of visual entertainment in view of their capacity to corrupt or misdirect the eye.

From Obstructed to Distracted Vision

The scene that Charles Willson Peale reveals and invites us to enter in his famous self-portrait before his Philadelphia museum in 1822 is, Susan Stewart (1995) argues, one of attentive viewing in which a Quaker woman holds up her hands in astonishment at the sight of a mastodon, while the attention of a father and his son are divided between the exhibits and the open book the boy is carrying as a guide, just as, behind them, another figure looks diligently at the exhibits (Figure 7.2). Seurat's *Cirque* (1891) provides a contrasting scene in which, as Jonathan Crary (2001) discusses it, the audience is distracted into a state of

Figure 7.2 The museum as a scene of attentive viewing. Charles Willson Peale, *The Artist in His Museum*, 1822. Oil on canvas. Size: $103\frac{3}{4} \times 79\frac{7}{8}$ in [263.5 × 202.9 cm]. Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr Collection)

trance-like immobility and disengagement from the scene of simulated movement represented by the circus performance: note, for example, the two men talking to one another on the row near the back (Figure 7.3). The painting thus reworks contemporary concerns, which were as evident in responses to early cinema as they had been in debates about earlier visual technologies such as the magic lantern, of an audience stunned into a numb, and numbing, inattentiveness as the perceptual assault of the new visual media complemented the shock of the new that was the hallmark of modern city life.

By contrast, on the cover of the April 1891 edition of *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly,* the magic lantern is shorn of its associations of visual trickery in a depiction of a lecture at the American Museum of Natural History in which the look of the audience is subjected to the authoritative guidance of the lecturer. The same was true, later, of the conditions on which film entered into the museum. Although the American Museum of Natural History was one of the first museums to experiment with film, its distrust of the medium was reflected in the delay of

Figure 7.3 Distracted vision. George Seurat, *Cirque*, 1891. (Paris, Musée d'Orsay. Photo RMN/© Hervé Lewandowski)

fifteen years between the invention of the kinetoscope in 1893 and its first film screening. Even then, film was admitted only in carefully regulated contexts: films were to be used only in lectures where their meaning could be mediated via the scientific authority vested in the lecturer, and where the risk of distracted forms of inattentiveness could be minimized (Griffiths, 2002).

My purpose in juxtaposing these scenes of spectatorship is to highlight the respects in which museums have pitched themselves against what have been variously construed as the clouding, diverting, hynoptic, dazzling, numbing, or shock effects of more popular visual technologies in their concern to promote those forms of visual and, more broadly, perceptual attentiveness that are needed if visitors are to take part in the forms of civic self-shaping that the modern public museum has been concerned to promote. If the images I have selected here are all nineteenth-century ones, there are both earlier and more recent versions of similar tensions in the social organization of vision that have defined the countervailing forces with which museums have had to contend in their endeavors to lend a civic direction to the eye. The earliest version of these tensions is traceable to the growing epistemological and social gap that emerged, early in the eighteenth century, between the practices of wonder and those of curiosity. By the time of

Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park argue, curiosity had cast off its reputation as a somewhat idle, undisciplined form of seeing to be ranked as a noble pursuit demanding sustained attention of a kind that only a few could achieve. Wonder, by contrast, had come to be regarded as a form of gawking, "a low, bumptious form of pleasure" that "obstinately refused to remedy the ignorance that aroused it" (Daston and Park, 1998: 328).

These terms in which curiosity and wonder were contrasted played a significant role in articulating the distinction between the elite and the vulgar as a distinction of visual practice and sensory comportment within the developing class dynamics of early capitalism. We can also see their lingering influence well into the nineteenth century. In Figure 7.4, the difference between, on the one hand, disciplined and knowledgeable looking and, on the other, ignorant gawking is depicted as a division within the group assembled before an exhibit at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Joy Kasson, in discussing this image, draws attention to the difference between the knowledgeable and focused attention of the well-dressed couple at the left of the group and the other spectators who "stand amazed, mouths agape" in an "awkward posture (hands in pocket, necks craning upward)" which "marks them as visually unsophisticated, while their clothing suggests that they are probably poor and from the country" (Kasson, 1990: 38).

A similar social division informed the terms in which, at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, the distracted attention attributed to film audiences – who were strongly associated, prior to the introduction

Figure 7.4 Wonder as gawking. "Lost in wonder." Norton, *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exhibition,* 54

of narrative cinema and respectable exhibition venues, with the unruliness of the urban working masses – served as a negative counterpoint to the ideal of the rational, attentive, well-ordered museum-going public. And it is true still of the terms in which the relations between museums and television audiences are posed when, as in a 1996 article in *The Daily Telegraphy*, a visit to the museum is invoked as an antidote to the culture of the "couch potato," the late-twentieth-century embodiment of distracted vision, who, it is said, "sits back on the sofa, his face vacuous and dumb, and stares at the television screen, and shovels popcorn, crisps, chocolates into his agape mouth while programmes reel by" (cited in Michael, 2000: 106). For Seurat's *Cirque*, we could now substitute a typical scene from the UK television series *The Royle Family* in which a roomful of couch potatoes eat, drink, gossip, fight, and make love before the box that is never able to claim more than half of their attention.

Yet, instructive though they are, these parallels across a two-century period can prove misleading if attention is not also paid to the role of different theories of vision and the accounts these offer for the failed or distorted vision of the popular classes. The ways in which distinctions of visual capacity mark, and are marked by, social distinctions, that is to say, have to be understood as being also conditioned by different accounts of the mechanisms of seeing. As Jonathan Crary's work has shown, the transition from the geometric optics which governed European accounts of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the physiological optics which governed nineteenth-century accounts of vision played a key role in redefining the terms in which class anxieties associated with the politics of vision were posed. Within geometric optics based on the Cartesian model of a detached and decorporealized observer, the challenge for museums and other rational forms of visual instruction was to counter the influence of popular visual entertainments whose effect was seen as one of clouding or obstructing vision by placing an irrational filter between the eye and the world. The challenge for the museum here was to provide a clear and transparent rational alternative to such obstructed vision.

Within physiological optics, by contrast, vision was viewed as rooted in the physiological structure of the body and, thereby, emerged as simultaneously subjective (different from one person to another) and social (to the degree that the body is affected by the social conditions in which it is formed). This meant that the reform of vision to attune it to the requirements of "civic seeing" was a developmental rather than a restorative project in the sense that it had to take account of the embodied nature of the visitor's visual capacities and the ways in which these might be affected by specific social conditions (Bennett, 2004b: ch. 7). For Henry Pitt Rivers, accordingly, it was not enough to simply arrange evolutionary displays to teach the working man the lessons of progress; account had also to be taken of the specific circumstances, rooted in working-class occupations, that limited or impaired working-class vision so as to put in place a developmental program of visual instruction that would counteract those influences.

Account has also to be taken, so far as contemporary debates are concerned, of the changed relations between museums and commercialized forms of popular

visual entertainment. If the incorporation of television, video, touch-screen computer displays, and Imax theaters into museums has undermined the distinction between museums and other contemporary forms of audiovisual culture, the increased importance of blockbuster exhibitions has also undermined the distinction between museums and the field of commercialized cultural production. There are, indeed, those who, like Paul Virilio (1994) and Jean Baudrillard (1982), have argued that these distinctions have now been eroded to such an extent that museums have themselves become "distraction machines." Such postmodernist perspectives typically overlook the variability of museum experience arising from the practices of different types of museum and variations in the social characteristics of their visitors. They also, Nick Prior suggests, miss the respects in which museums are now typically obliged to negotiate and balance the needs and interests of different audiences to meet government requirements that they both enlarge and diversify their visitor profiles. This means, he argues, that "the contradictory tensions that once might have threatened the idea of the museum are now permanent fixtures within it" (Prior, 2003: 67).

The tension between the museum as civic educator and the negative pull of distracted vision is thus often enacted *within* museums as forms of "civic seeing" compete with distracting visual technologies within the museum space. This tension is, indeed, sometimes playfully foregrounded in exhibits whose primary *raison d'être* is to engage with the organization of museum space as a form of metacommentary on the conditions of museum practices. Duane Hanson's *Tourists* (1970) – two figures located in one of the galleries at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art – is a case in point (Figure 7.5). Gaudily dressed in casual holiday clothes, cameras at the ready, shopping in hand, these two life-like figures, installed unmarked in the middle of the gallery, catch the visitor unawares. Their verisimilitude is so strong that it takes a while to realize that they are not really other visitors, but an exhibit which, in occupying the position of spectator, foregrounds the question of the visitor's look. Are they knowledgeable visitors? Ignorant ones? Are they puzzled? Attentive? Or just bluffing? And what kind of visitor am I? How do the other visitors see me? As like these? Or as different? There is not really any way of answering these questions which, nonetheless, are insistently raised, injecting a restless tension into the museum space as the visitor is caught between self-recognition and identification as also a tourist and an uncertainty regarding just how best to play the role of spectator which, forced by the exhibit into self-consciousness, is thereby made problematic, no longer habitable on a purely spontaneous basis.

Yet these figures also point to something of broader significance by calling attention to the importance of point of view within the museum space. Throughout the greater part of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seeing civically was a practice to be undertaken from the singular and fixed spectatorial position that museums sought to arrange as the ideal vantage point from which to see and understand the logic underlying the exhibition arrangements. The key developments in the twentieth century, particularly during its later decades,

Figure 7.5 The spectator as exhibit. Duane Hanson, *Tourists*, 1970. (Courtesy of The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh)

worked to pluralize the optical – and, thereby, also the epistemological and political – vantage points that visitors might take up within, or bring with them into, the museum space. This was, and continues to be, partly a matter of the development of interactive displays which, freeing visitors from the tutelary grip of earlier, more directive forms of curatorial authority, leaves them more scope for constructing their own forms of engagement with the museum environment. No longer addressing a detached observer placed before an exhibition arranged for his or her contemplative inspection, interactive displays also often dislocate the eye from its controlling position in favor of more multi-sensory forms of engagement in which sight, hearing, and touch interact to produce a more embodied, active, and participatory relationship to the museum, and to other visitors.

These transformations, Andrew Barry argues, have, in turn, to be understood in relation to the shift from earlier, more corporate models of citizenship to those of neo-liberalism. If interactivity promotes the development of more active forms of self-direction, less reliant on the authoritative guidance of others, this reflects a

change in the role of public authorities from one of directing the citizen to one of establishing the conditions in which citizens can become more active in, and more responsible for, their own government (Barry 2001: 135). It is, however, in response to the politics of difference and the influence on museums of the emerging agendas of cultural citizenship in their commitment to the recognition of differentiated cultural rights and entitlements that demands for museums to develop more plural forms of "civic seeing" have been most insistently pressed.

Seeing Differences Differently

Museums have, of course, always, at least in their modern forms, been places for making differences – whether natural, social, or cultural – visible. They have done so, however, mainly to and for a controlling point of view which, while theoretically universal, has, in fact, in accordance with the restricted understandings of citizenship prevailing at different historical moments, been restricted to white, middle-class men only, to white men only, to white men and women only, or to men only. Their depictions of difference have also usually been hierarchically arranged, especially, in the context of museums' varied roles in relation to colonial histories, in racialized hierarchies – whether they be those of the developmental series of typological arrangements, cranial exhibitions, or exhibitions resting on Orientalist assumptions (Dias, 1998). The first significant challenges to such hierarchical visualizations of cultural difference came, in the United States, from Franz Boas's development of the life group in its commitment to reconstruct the totality of a culture as something to be understood on its own terms and, in France, from the similar exhibition forms developed at the Musée de l'Homme by Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Rivière and, subsequently, the *ensemble écologique* developed by Rivière at the Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires (Dias, 2003). While these new visual technologies proved important as a means for equalizing the relations between exhibited cultures in the museum space, they proved problematic in other regards, seeming to fix the cultures they depicted in a condition of static timelessness (Dias, 1994). Their chief limitation from a contemporary perspective, however, is that they did little to challenge the assumption that there was one, and only one, point of view for the visitor to occupy.

By contrast, the terms in which questions of "civic seeing" are now posed typically stress the need for exhibitions to be arranged so as to allow multiple possibilities in terms of how they are both seen and interpreted. The demands of indigenous peoples, of diasporic communities and minority ethnic groups of longstanding, of women, and of minority sexualities for recognition within the museum space have thrown into high relief the socially marked nature of the supposedly universal, singular point of view museums had earlier constructed as the sole one from which their civic lessons might be correctly seen and interpreted. At the same time, new approaches to difference, whether of ethnicity, sexuality, or gender, which stress their unfixed, relational, constantly mobile nature, have called

into question the taxonomic approaches to difference which characterized museum practices throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

This stress on the relationality of difference – the view, as Kevin Hetherington (2002: 196) puts it, "that we all differ from one another because of gender, class, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, etc. and not that just some differ from an unmarked norm" – has led, in the steps that museums have taken to translate public-policy agendas of cultural diversity into practical and material forms, to access strategies that are posed in terms of "multiple optics rather than a singular trained one" (Hetherington, 2002: 192). And this, in turn, has led to a significant renewal of interest in exhibition practices from the pre-Enlightenment period when the eye was not so singularly addressed or so authoritatively regulated. James Clifford's (1997) influential conception of museums as "contact zones" – as places where the perspectives of different cultures can mix and mingle, entering into dialogic exchanges that are not subordinated to a controlling point of view – has thus been connected to a notable increase in the attention paid to cabinets of curiosity both for the possibility they hold out of a more flexible, varied, and dialogic organization of the visitor's lines of sight and as a reminder of exhibition contexts in which seeing was accompanied by reciprocal relations of conversational give-and-take.

It is, however, in programs intended to make museums accessible to the visually impaired that the continuing optical bias of museums is most revealingly thrown into high relief. The visually impaired, Hetherington argues, constitute a special case for the museum as "they are not just another category of difference demanding that they be recognised and catered for, from the start they are Other to the principles of the museum as a space of vision and conservation" (Hetherington, 2002: 195). Examining a number of initiatives, from the Tate's first touch tour for the blind in 1976 to the 1998 tactile display and book produced by the British Museum to make the Parthenon Frieze accessible to the visually impaired, Hetherington usefully draws attention to the respects in which they reflect a continuing optical bias. The tactile book prepared for the Parthenon Frieze, for example, aimed to make available to touch an impression of the frieze as it might be seen, thus functioning as a sight-centered organization of touch in a context where actually touching the frieze itself was not allowed. It was, as Hetherington puts it, "an optical prosthesis in which the hand (secondary) can become like the eye (primary)" (Hetherington, 2002: 199). It is a useful example in underlining how far museum practices would need to change if the eye-centered programs of "civic seeing" that have dominated the museum's post-Enlightenment history were to be developed into places for more pluri-directional civic exchanges that engage a broader range of the visitors' senses.